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ABSTRACT

The relationships among self-reported social desirability, biological sex, and sex-role orientation are examined. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) consists of 60 personality characteristics divided equally into three subscales labeled Femininity (F), Masculinity (M), and Social Desirability (SD). One hundred and twenty-six undergraduates were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which each of the 60 items was self-descriptive. Using their M and F scores, subjects were classified as feminine, masculine, androgynous or undifferentiated based on a significant difference/median split method. The SD scale of the BSRI was factor analyzed and three interpretable dimensions emerged. A 2-way multivariate analysis of variance yielded no significant interaction or biological sex effects. Feminine individuals, however, generally saw themselves as more dependable/supportive, more communicative, and less pretentious than any other group. The androgynous group followed. The findings tend to contradict previous research which saw femininity as the least socially desirable sex-role orientation. Results of past studies are questioned and possible explanations are discussed. (Author/RL)

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SELF-REPORTED SOCIAL DESIRABILITY IN SEX-STEREOTYPED AND ANDROGYNOUS INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships among self-reported social desirability, biological sex, and sex-role orientation.

The Social Desirability scale of the BSRI was factor analyzed and three interpretable dimensions emerged. A 2-way multivariate analysis of variance yielded no significant interaction or biological sex effects. Feminine individuals, however, generally saw themselves as more dependable/supportive, more communicative, and less pretentious than any other group. The androgynous group followed.

The findings tend to contradict previous research which saw femininity as the least socially desirable sex-role orientation. Results of past studies are questioned and possible explanations are discussed.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship among self-reported social desirability, biological sex, and sex-role orientation. A second objective was to investigate the multi-dimensionality of the Social Desirability subscale of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years the investigation of sex-role identity has established itself as an important area of research in the field of mental health. The traditional view of sex-role socialization has been based on the belief that maturity, social adjustment and psychological health are best achieved by conforming to society's sex-typed expectations of human behavior (Bem, 1974).

Recent research, however, has pointed to the socio-psychological limitations of rigid, sex-sterotyped behavior (Bem, 1975; Bem and Lenny, 1976; Bem, Martyna and Watson, 1976; Spence, Helmreich and Stapp, 1975) resulting in increased interest in the concept of psychological androgyny which Bem (1974) describes as flexible, situationally adaptive behavior unrestricted by sex-typed constraints. Current research also tends to support the notion that psychological androgyny is generally superior to sex-typed behavior with respect to self-esteem and social desirability, and that this sex-typed disadvantage is especially true for femininity (Falbo, 1977; Harris and Schwab, 1979; Nevill, 1977; Schiff and Koopman, 1978; Spence, et.al., 1975).

Hogan (1977) and Bem (1974) found that females score significantly higher than males on the Social Desirability subscale of the BSRI. This appears to conflict with previously mentioned reports regarding the tenuous relationship between femininity and self-esteem. The present study sought to take a more refined look at these relationships.

Since many of the characteristics considered descriptive and/or socially desirable for women in our society are also considered generally undesirable and in some cases even mentally unhealthy (e.g., cries very easily, very

illogical, childlike, gullible, very sneaky, worrying)(Bem, 1974; Broverman, et.al., 1970; Heilbrun, 1976; Stoppard and Kalin, 1978), it would seem that feminine individuals subscribing to these traits would experience a unique set of social conflicts which might impair psychological health. Such individuals might, therefore, seem themselves as less socially desirable than either androgynous or masculine individuals who possess highly valued masculine social traits.

One explanation for Bem's (1974) and Hogan's (1977) findings might be that they treated social desirability as a unidimensional trait. The present study, therefore, investigated the multidimensionality of social desirability.

DATA SOURCE

The BSRI was administered to 126 undergraduates (51 males, 75 females) attending a liberal arts college in Central New York State. The age of the sample ranged from 18 to 28 years with a mean age of 19.5.

METHOD

Instrumentation. The BSRI consists of 60 personality characteristics divided equally into three subscales labeled Femininity (F), Masculinity (M), and Social Desirability (SD). Respondents are asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which each of the 60 items is self-descriptive. Using their M and F scores, subjects are then classified as feminine, masculine, androgynous or undifferentiated based on the significant difference/median split method recommended by Orlofsky, Aslin and Ginsburg (1977).

Procedures and Analysis. The data analysis consisted of three stages. The first stage consisted of separate factor analyses for the M and F items of the BSRI. Data were submitted to a principal components analysis and the resulting factors rotated employing the varimax rotation. Those items generally found to be irrelevant in previous studies as well as the present one were elimimated. The revised instrument was then used to identify subjects' sex-role orientation. This elimination process follows the suggestion of Gaudreau (1977) and

Waters, et.al. (1977) that a more efficient procedure for measuring masculinity/femininity would be to use only certain items from each scale in computing individual scores, and that the deletion of irrelevant items would increase both the homogeneity and interpretability of the scale.

Secondly, a similar factor analysis was conducted on the SD items of the BSRI. Factors with eigenvalues greater than one were retained. This resulted in three interpretable factors. Factor scores were then computed for each of these dimensions.

Finally, a Two-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and appropriate post-hoc tests was conducted. Biological sex and sex-role orientation served as the independent variables and the factor scores for the three social desirability dimensions served as the dependent variables.

RESULTS

The factor analysis of the 20 M items yielded two factors which were consistent with those identified by Gaudreau (1977) and Waters, et.al. (1977). Inspection of the high loading items resulted in the elimination of six items (defends own beliefs, athletic, analytical, masculine, individualistic, competitive) from the computation of the subjects' M score. Similarly, six items were found to be irrelevant on the F scale (shy, flatterable, soft-spoken, gullible, childlike, does not use harsh language). Using these revised scales, subjects were then classified as either feminine, masculine, androgynous or undifferentiated.

The factor analysis of the social desirability items yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The first factor accounted for 41.9% of the total variance and appeared to measure the extent to which an individual sees himself/herself as being dependable and supportive. Factor 2 accounted for 18.6% of the variance. It appeared that Factor 2 was a measure of pretentiousness. The third and final factor accounted for 16% of the variance and was considered to be a measure of the extent to which subjects saw themselves

as uncommunicative.

The multivariate anslysis of variance yielded no significant interaction or biological sex effects. The multivariate F of 3.46 for the sex-role effect was significant ($p < .0005$). The univariate analyses for the three dimensions of SD indicated that there were significant differences among the four groups with respect to Factor 1 and Factor 2 but not with respect to Factor 3.

The Newman-Keuls method of multiple comparisons for Factor 1 indicated that both the feminine and androgynous groups saw themselves as significantly more dependable and supportive than the undifferentiated group. There were no significant differences in the other comparisons.

The follow-up tests on Factor 2 indicated that both the feminine and undifferentiated groups saw themselves as significantly less pretentious than the masculine group. The feminine group also scored as significantly less pretentious than the androgynous group. The remaining paired comparisons for Factor 2 were not significant.

It is interesting to note that the percentage of cross-sexed individuals was relatively small (10.7% masculine females and 11.8% feminine males) indicating that neither males nor females were totally abandoning conventional roles in favor of cross-sexed behavior. Thirty-five percent of the male sample scored as masculine and 27.5% were androgynous, while 50.7% of the female sample was categorized as feminine and 30.7% were androgynous. Only 8% of the female population was categorized as undifferentiated while the male undifferentiated group accounted for 25.5% of the male sample.

DISCUSSION

The present study identified three interpretable factors within the SD scale. With respect to biological sex, the results suggest that females do not see themselves as significantly more or less socially desirable than males. This contradicts previous research (Bem, 1974; Hogan, 1977) which determined that females score significantly more socially desirable than males on the BSRI.

The scores for the feminine individuals indicated that they generally saw themselves as more dependable/supportive, more communicative, and less pretentious than the masculine group. These differences achieved significance only on the pretentiousness factor.

Although these results may appear to be contradictory to previous research which found weak relationships between femininity and self-esteem (Schiff and Koopman, 1978; Spence, et.al., 1975), it may be that self-esteem is a multidimensional trait. Feminine individuals therefore, may not have high self-esteem in the sense that they recognize that society-at-large (including the business and political world) does not value the nurturant traits common to femininity, but they may have a strong sense of self-esteem/social desirability with respect to the interpersonal acceptance their traits generate in apolitical settings.

Further, the six items deleted from the feminity scale could essentially be identified as immature, non-assertive traits. The absence of these characteristics may have enhanced the femininity scores of those individuals who generally would reject such negatively stereotypic traits.

Similar to the feminine group, the androgynous group scored as more dependable/supportive and more communicative than the masculine group, although neither of these differences reached significance. The androgynous group and the masculine group, however, were significantly more pretentious than the feminine group. The androgynous group which fared so well in previous research relative to self-esteem and other measures of mental health did not fare as well as the feminine group in this study, though both performed better than the masculine group. This contradicts previous findings (Bem, 1977; Schiff and Koopman, 1978; Spence, et.al., 1975) that stereotypic socialization, especially for women, is related to negative self-evaluation.

One implication of these findings might be that given a reasonable and realistic model, individuals are willing to acknowledge the feminine aspects

of their personality, and that this can and does enhance their self-perceived social desirability.

While the feminine individual may not be as flexible or behaviorally adaptable as the androgynous person, she/he may indeed be considered more socially desirable relative to interpersonal priorities. As feminine individuals begin to actively reject those stereotypically ascribed immature and unassertive descriptors, the concepts of femininity and mental health may realize greater unity in the eyes of both men and women.

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